

350 Eurobodalla submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Unprecedented Fires, Climate Chaos and a Traumatized Community

This has been very hard trying to write a submission covering the full extent of our concerns so soon after these traumatic events. Some of us lost homes, some fled for their lives from fire storms, some fought the fires here and up into northern NSW and some of us just choked on smoke and lived in fear for a couple of months.

Introduction

We are living in a climate emergency and we expect an emergency response.

Across Australia more than 30 people died in the fires, more than 400 died from inhaling bushfire smoke. A lot of people risked their lives defending us and our forests and we are deeply grateful. Many more people could have died and many thought they were about to die during this emergency. 3,000 homes were burnt and many more saved by fire fighters. New South Wales was the worst hit state.

There was a shocking scale of death and destruction of forests and wildlife with more than a billion animals killed. There was an appalling loss of sheep and cattle and agricultural land.

In Eurobodalla almost 80% of the shire was burnt and three people died. Many homes were lost. 350 Eurobodalla has been warning that climate change would bring worse bushfires, but we were shocked by the ferocity and scale of this summer's fires. Climate chaos has hit harder and sooner than we expected.

People did their very best in a new and horrifying situation. There is much that can be learned from what happened and what we did this summer.

350 Eurobodalla is part of the world wide 350.org movement, dedicated to returning to a safe climate where carbon dioxide (equivalent) in the atmosphere is below 350 parts per million.

Climate change the major factor in intensity and spread of fires

2019 was the hottest and driest year on record

Australia's average mean temperature in 2019 was 1.52 °C above average, making it the warmest on record since consistent national temperature records began in 1910 and surpassing the previous record in 2013 of 1.33 °C above average.

Meanwhile the national average rainfall total in 2019 was 277 mm, the lowest since consistent national records began in 1900. The previous record low was 314 mm set during the Federation drought in 1902.

(Source: Bureau of Meteorology, 9 January, 2020)

First post-fires assessment quantifying bushfire risk due to climate change

Only a short time has elapsed since the recent fires. However, the first assessment quantifying the role of climate change in the 2019-20 Australian bushfires found that:

- (1) Global warming has boosted the probability of hot, dry weather of 2019-20 in south-eastern Australia by at least 30% since 1900.
- (2) At 2°C warming these conditions would occur at least four times more often than in 1900

Source: Attribution of the Australian bushfire risk to anthropogenic climate change. Van Oldenborgh, G.J. et al. <https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/bushfires-in-australia-2019-2020> accessed April 2020

The Garnaut Report

In the 2008 Garnaut Climate Change Review, which examined the scientific evidence around the impacts of climate change on Australia and its economy, economist Professor Ross Garnaut predicted that without adequate action, the nation would face a more frequent and intense fire season by 2020.

(Source: ABC News, 8 January, 2020)

Worst ever bushfires

The 2019-20 bushfires in New South Wales (NSW) have been unprecedented in their extent and intensity. As of 28 January 2020, the fires in NSW had burnt 5.3 million hectares (6.7% of the State), including 2.7 million hectares in national parks (37% of the State's national park estate).

(Source: NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, 27 February, 2020)

A State of Emergency

The NSW Government declared a State of Emergency in November, December and January to try to cope with the unprecedented bushfires.

For the third time in this extraordinary and unprecedented fire season, the New South Wales Government has declared a state of emergency. NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian said the Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons requested the declaration ahead of extremely hot conditions with more than 100 fires currently raging across the state. The state of emergency will be active for seven days from Friday. "Declaring this state of emergency is vital to the safety of communities in NSW as we face the most devastating bushfire season in living memory," Ms Berejiklian said.

(Source: News.com.au, 2 January, 2020)

NSW RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons

Climate change is having an impact on every level of fire management, the New South Wales rural fire chief has said on the first anniversary of the Blue Mountains bushfires.

(Source: NSW RFS, 17 October. 2014)

Mr Fitzsimmons also said that climate change had contributed to the unprecedented number of blazes burning across Australia this season.

"There's no doubt that we see longer, hotter fire seasons, which correlate with shorter periods where you would typically get your safest period for burning," he said.

(Source: 7News, 8 January, 2020)

Predictions of future climatic conditions in South East New South Wales

Eastern Southern Slopes projections are:

Rain

- Less winter and spring rain
- Drying trend since 1960
- Up to 30% less rain by 2090 under high emissions scenario

Temperature

- Average temperatures will continue to increase in all seasons
- Temperatures have increased over the last century
- Rate of warming higher since 1960
- High emissions will deliver 2.7 to 4.3°C warming by 2090
- Intermediate emissions will deliver 1.3 to 2.2°C warming by 2090

Extreme temperature

- More hot days and longer warm spells
- Substantial increase in maximum temperature on hot days
- Fewer frosts

Droughts & floods

- Time in drought increases
- More intense flooding and rain events

Sea rise

- Average sea levels continuing to rise
- Height of storm surge events will increase
- Sea level rise averaged 1.4mm/year between 1966 and 2009
- High emissions will deliver 0.38 to 0.81 m rise by 2090
- Intermediate emissions will deliver 0.27 to 0.62 m rise by 2090

Sea warming

- High emissions see sea surface temperatures of 1.6 to 3.4°C by 2090
- The sea will become more acid
- Threats to marine species local abundance and community structures

Bushfire weather

- Harsher fire-weather climate
- Evapotranspiration increases in all seasons
- Solar radiation increases
- Humidity decrease in cool season

Source: <https://www.climatechangeinaustralia.gov.au/en/climate-projections/future-climate/regional-climate-change-explorer/sub-clusters/?current=SSVEC&popup=true&tooltip=true> accessed April 2020

Australian Government response is inadequate

The Australian Government's target of a 26-28% reduction in emissions by 2030 is half what is recommended for Australia to comply with the Paris aim of remaining below 1.5 degrees of global heating. However, the present emergency has happened at only one degree of global warming. A more urgent response is required and Australia must act to reduce emissions.

The Australian Government is not actually reducing emissions, which are remaining high.

Accepting global heating of 1.5 degrees is accepting that our disasters will be worse than the drought, the bushfires, storms and the degradation of our coastal waters will be worse than we are already experiencing.

We expect that the Royal Commission will consider the long term and the immediate responses needed to deal with our climate emergency.

Findings

Following a drought made worse by climate change and 2019 being the hottest, driest year on record, the Royal Commission should find that climate change was responsible for the bushfire season being unprecedented in its severity and extent. The Royal Commission should find that the Australian Government has failed to adequately reduce the nation's greenhouse gas emissions.

Recommendations

The Royal Commission should recommend that Australia should declare a climate emergency.

That Australia should plan to reduce emissions on an urgent basis and adopt a target of net zero by 2040 or earlier.

That the Australian Government should encourage other nations to follow Australia's lead in urgently reducing emissions.

The Government was warned this would be an extreme season

Retired leaders warned of the danger

The Retired Emergency Leaders for Climate Action asked to meet the Prime Minister in April 2019 and then again after the federal election in May. They warned that Australia was facing an extreme summer bushfire danger and wanted the Federal Government to get more large water tanker aircraft.

Retired NSW Fire Commissioner Greg Mullins was interviewed by ABC:

"We have tried since April to get a meeting with the Prime Minister," Mr Mullins told ABC Radio on Thursday morning. "It's clear now we won't get that meeting. We had some pretty simple asks that we wanted to talk to the government about.

"Funding for large aerial fire tankers. People would have seen the images the other day of the Hercules coming in and dropping in 15,000 litres of retardant at Turramurra. I watched that with great interest because I was in charge of the fire there in 1994 where 17 homes were lost. That cut the fire off immediately.

(Source: ABC News 14 November 2019)

Benefits of large fire fighting aircraft

The value of aircraft when a fire has just started was demonstrated at Maloney's Beach on the North side of Batemans Bay on 9 December 2019. Six small aircraft and three helicopters were diverted from the Currowan fire and were able to extinguish the fire with the assistance of RFS ground crews. (Source: Bay Post, 10 December 2019).

By contrast, fires that got away burnt for weeks and longer, burning thousands of hectares of forest, with huge perimeters. As the retired leaders requested, more large tankers are needed.

Hazard reduction burning benefits limited by climate change

Hazard reduction has benefits and should be part of the management of fire risk, but cannot stop fires driven by high temperatures and strong winds. This is from an interview with Batemans Bay RFS [REDACTED]:

[REDACTED] said fire burnt areas where fuel had already been reduced through hazard reduction burns.

"Out of this whole area in Currowan, do you think there hasn't been hazard reductions up there? Of course there have," he said. "It went straight through those hazard reduction areas, depending on how old they were. It probably didn't go as intensely as other areas but it still went through."

[REDACTED] said backburning during the fires would be more hazardous than the fire itself.

Even after the fire, burned leaf litter reignited at [East Lynne](#) weeks later.

He said Forestry did a hazard reduction burn in the Benandarah area in winter 2018 "which helped a lot".

"That hazard reduction definitely played a part in that (Currowan) fire not progressing further south," he said. "People whinged about the smoke at the time, but I'm glad they did it, because things would have been a lot different if they hadn't."

(Source: Batemans Bay Post, 4 March 2020)

Aboriginal traditional burning is supported by 350 Eurobodalla as a way to manage forests and reduce fuel load by cool burns. Aboriginal fire practitioners recognise that climate change has made things worse. They want to work with scientists to care for our forests.

Random or repeated hazard reduction can result in the proliferation of highly flammable undergrowth. Management of the bush has to be done properly within the limits of a shortened burn off season.

Findings

The Australian Government was warned that fire seasons were becoming more extreme but did not take action to purchase or hire more large fire fighting aircraft. The Government was warned that climate change would lead to worse fire seasons.

The Royal Commission should find that the Australian Government failed to adequately prepare for worse fire seasons, despite a number of warnings.

Recommendations

The Royal Commission should recommend that the Australian Government should convene a working group of current and retired emergency leaders to plan for the next and future extreme fire seasons. The Government should accept the advice of these experts.

Adequate funding should be made available for more large fire fighting aircraft and to support state bush fire fighting agencies with equipment and training.

Eurobodalla issues

Despite heightened fire activity and concerning weather forecasts, holiday makers were encouraged by Eurobodalla Coast Tourism and Eurobodalla Shire's Mayor to travel to our region during a number of notable high risk periods. This was unsafe and failed to calculate risk.

Evacuation centres

Thousands of locals, visitors, and children who sought shelter on beaches experienced acute distress and a number have ongoing trauma.

The evacuation of many thousands of holiday makers out of the region was chaotic, and demonstrated the magnitude of demands placed on local and state governments as a result of bushfire disasters of this scale and severity.

Demands on infrastructure - tele communications, fuel, groceries, supply chains - and on RFS and emergency services, could not be adequately met.

Evacuation centres and Batemans Bay Hospital Moruya District Hospital were ill equipped, with Moruya Hospital also coming under fire threat.

The viability of the Australian Summer Beach holiday and the vulnerability of regional tourist economies has been highlighted, especially when assessed next to evidence of increasing global temperatures and analysis of unprecedented climate-led bushfire behaviour during this elongated fire season of 2019-2020.

The cost of *not* acting on emissions to reduce further impacts by climate disasters, is clearly economically and socially too high.

There have been reports of suicides in our area since the devastating firestorm activity.

Narooma Evacuation Centre failed to open on one occasion during Emergency Advice, with evacuees forced to seek safety in parks and cars in the town.

There were no cots suitable for older residents (some in their eighties and nineties) or for the disabled at the evacuation centres.

HEPA filters were lacking for bushfire smoke. Sanitation facilities were inadequate for numbers, with a reported outbreak of gastroenteritis. at Moruya Evacuation Centre.

Findings

Despite the approaching fires, which had steadily moved south for months, Eurobodalla was crammed with holiday makers. This made it very difficult to provide adequate shelter when the fires came south of the Kings Highway.

The Royal Commission should find that the evacuation centres were not sufficient for residents or holiday makers during a fire season of this magnitude.

Recommendations

The Australian Government should fund the conversion of community buildings to act as heat and bushfire refuges. They will need air conditioning and air filtration to protect against heat and smoke. Facilities for elderly and people with disabilities must be provided.

Communication breakdowns

Good bushfire communications save lives. Good communications are essential for RFS crews and people living in bushfire prone areas. The mobile phone notifications and the Fires Near Me website and App helped many people to stay safe for much of the time during the fires.

The sheer number of fires eventually overwhelmed the Fires Near Me website which could not keep up as the fires spread.

In the Eurobodalla mobile phone towers including those at Wanderah Mountain, Surf Beach and Malua Bay were burnt on New Year's Eve 2019.

Power was cut along 100 kms of the South Coast, disrupting radio, phone and television access for residents, holiday makers and fire fighters.

On Monday, January 13, (Telstra Regional GM) ██████████ told Australian Community Media that 12 mobile tower sites on the South Coast had been impacted and five destroyed.

The bushfires were the "biggest scale of event" the company has dealt with.

He said the South Coast had more than 40 mobile base stations off the air, mostly due to power outages.

"It was primarily due to the mains power across the region being impacted," [REDACTED] said.

(Source: Batemans Bay Post, 14 January, 2020)

This meant that mobile communications were lost to many people in the path of the fires. Residents of Malua Bay and nearby areas were without coverage for many days. The Deua River valley only had mobile coverage restored in mid April.

This is not good enough. There needs to be better local back up power and rapid installation of temporary towers. In Eurobodalla emergency services struggled to provide diesel fuel for generators at hospitals and sewage works.

Findings

The Royal Commission should find that loss of communications during critical fire events made conditions much more dangerous for fire fighters and the public. There were unacceptable delays in restoring services.

Recommendations

The Australian Government should ensure that there is adequate back up power in communities which may be isolated by fires. The government should ensure that emergency mobile and radio communication can be promptly re-established during emergencies.

Volunteers need compensation for expenses and lost wages

The unprecedented bushfires have burned for months longer than ever before and resulted in exhaustion and long call outs for volunteers.

350 Eurobodalla welcomes the offer of \$6,000 to some of the NSW RFS volunteers who lost wages while fighting the fires. This should be extended for people volunteering in the other emergency organisations – the SES, the Red Cross, St John's Ambulance, etc. In addition people who are retired should be able to claim reimbursement for their expenses during bushfire emergencies.

Findings

The Royal Commission should find that volunteers were asked to be on duty far beyond what was normal and that this resulted in financial hardship for many.

Recommendations

The Australian Government should fund expenses for volunteers and provide compensation for lost wages and lost income for businesses which closed to provide volunteers.

Recommended witnesses for the Royal Commission

The Royal Commission must hear from the Retired Emergency Leaders for Climate Action. Their many years of experience and observation of how the changing climate is affecting bushfires will be essential for the inquiry to consider.

Professor David Bowman of the University of Tasmania should also be called as a witness. His study of fire across Australia and his analysis of the changes we need to prepare for a future of worse fires should be considered.

Conclusions

These are not “natural” disasters

The extreme scale of the drought, the bushfires and the heating of our coastal waters cannot be regarded as “natural” disasters. They are beyond what would occur naturally and are a result of human induced climate change.

There is a clear path to a safe future. We must deal with the present impacts of climate change. We will suffer for a time, but if we act to drastically cut emissions and draw down carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, we can return to a safe climate.

Many people to thank

We are deeply grateful to all the people who helped our community during and after this unprecedented disaster. And to all the people who are working to build a safer future.

This Submission is from 350 Eurobodalla

We thank the Royal Commission for this opportunity to put our views before you.

██████████
██████████
██████████
██